Section 5: Areas of Concern in Lake Huron

In 1987, four AOCs were identified within the Lake Huron watershed, as well as the St. Marys River. Collingwood Harbour and Severn Sound in Canada were delisted in 1994 and 2003 respectively. Monitoring is ongoing in these areas to ensure that environmental quality is maintained. Each of the remaining AOCs are being addressed through on-going programs, as described below. For more information on AOCs, see the following websites:
http://gldev.on.ec.gc.ca/water/raps/map_e.html
http://www.epa.gov/glnpo/aoc/index.html

5.1 Spanish Harbour, Ontario

At the Spanish Harbour AOC, all recommended actions were completed and in 1999, the area was the first in the Great Lakes to be recognized as being an Area in Recovery. Heavy metal contamination in the river and harbour are being monitored for natural recovery. Results from a recent survey (October 2003) are being compiled and will be used to generate modeling predictions to estimate how long recovery may take. A six year muskellunge re-introduction program involving many partner organizations is now in the final assessment stages.

5.2 Saginaw River/Bay, Michigan

The Saginaw Bay Watershed is one of Michigan's most diverse areas-its rich resources support agriculture, manufacturing, tourism, outdoor recreations, and a vast variety of wildlife. The watershed is 8,709 square miles in size and is America's largest contiguous freshwater coastal wetland system. Contaminated sediments, fish consumption advisories, degraded fisheries and loss of significant recreational values are the major reasons for this AOC's designation. Saginaw Bay priorities include remediation of PCB contaminated sediment, nonpoint pollution control, wetland restoration, and habitat restoration.

The Stage 1 Saginaw River/Bay Remedial Action Plan (RAP) process began in July 1986 and was completed in September 1988. Following substantial progress, an updated Saginaw River/Bay RAP was developed in 1994. More recently, the Measures of Success report (2001) provides a foundation for redirecting and refocusing efforts. It recommends a list of targeted restored conditions that should be viewed as steps toward the delisting of the Saginaw Bay/River AOC. Preparation of the updated Saginaw River/Bay RAP is being done through the committee structure of the Partnership for the Saginaw Bay Watershed.

Major ongoing efforts are addressing contaminated sediments and floodplain soils within the Tittabawassee and Saginaw River. Sediments and floodplain soils in the Saginaw River Watershed contain a variety of organic compounds, including dioxins, furans, and PCBs. The 1998 $28.2 million natural resources damages settlement funded the removal of 342,433 cubic yards of contaminated sediments from the river, protection of coastal wetlands (1677 acres), and restoration of coastal wetland and lakeplain prairie on 391 acres. Portions of this settlement used as match for a $1M North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) grant that is improving habitat on approximately 3,000 acres. Also, plans are being finalized for restoration of the hydrology of Tobico Marsh, a 900 acre wetland immediately adjacent and connected to Saginaw Bay. This project is expected to improve spawning opportunities for Saginaw Bay northern pike.

Existing data from US Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. EPA, and Michigan DEQ indicate that, at some locations, dioxin contamination exceeds human health risked-based regulatory levels and ecological risk based screening levels. Michigan Department of Environmental Quality is actively characterizing Saginaw River sediments and floodplain soils for compounds of regulatory and environmental significance. The data collected will assist in decision making regarding short-term protection of human health and the

environment and long-term remediation of the Saginaw River and Saginaw Bay. It will also provide input to similar decision-making on the Shiawassee River, a tributary of the Saginaw River. Michigan DEQ is engaging the community as an integral part of addressing the dioxin issues in the watershed and Area of Concern. A Community Advisory Panel (CAP) has been established to bring stakeholders together and advance remediation.

5.3 Binational Area of Concern: St. Marys River

The St. Marys River is a 112 km connecting channel between Lakes Superior and Huron and is subject to many activities under the binational Remedial Action Plan. Accomplishments on the Canadian side have included the development of wetland protection strategies, the recovery of walleye populations, the design of habitat features in the city's waterfront development, and installation of an activated sludge treatment facility to reduce the oxygen demand and suspended solids in the discharge water of the St. Marys Paper mechanical pulp mill. The Environmental Management Agreement with Algoma Steel, to be renewed in 2004, has likewise resulted in many improvements to both air and wastewater discharges. Current projects include: funding for the design of a strategy for contaminated sediment; review of delisting criteria; wastewater characterization study; and wetland conservation. Future challenges include the need to control inputs from the century-old Algoma slag site, long-term sea lamprey control efforts to restore impaired fisheries, and the finalization and implementation of a sediment management plan.

Priorities of the St. Marys River on the Michigan side are cleanup of the Cannelton Tannery Superfund site, sea lamprey control, and elimination of combined sewer overflows. The Cannelton Superfund site has been restored for re-use by the city of Sault Ste. Marie and its citizens. Once remediated, the site may support light industry, residential homes, or park areas. Certain use restrictions will apply to various parts of the site to prevent contamination from affecting human or ecosystem health. The sea lamprey control efforts will help restore impaired fisheries in the St. Marys River as well as northern Lake Huron and Lake Michigan. This will be a long-term, continuing effort since the opportunistic lamprey can take quick advantage of any lapse in larvae and adult control measures. Combined sewer separation in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan has already eliminated the worst of the occasional overflows of sewage to the St. Marys River in Michigan waters. Continued work on this will eventually stop all potential for untreated sewage entering the river, even in the worst run-off events.